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Free to Fail or On-Track to College

An Introduction to the UChicago CCSR Research Series



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Free to Fail or On-Track to College

High schools face two central challenges that can seem contradictory—how to raise academic standards and prepare more students for college while also decreasing the risks of failure and dropout. Yet, while these goals may seem to be in opposition, research shows the most important key to achieving both goals is the same: course performance.

By far, the strongest lever for both graduation and college readiness is to get students engaged and working hard in their classes—attending every day, keeping up with assignments, participating in class, and trying their best to produce good work. Regardless of what tests, curriculum, teacher evaluation metrics, supplemental programs, or professional development schools use, schools must actively engage students in instruction if they want to keep students in school and making progress towards college and career readiness. In this way, the two central challenges are not contradictory; they require the same core strategies.

If student engagement is key for high school graduation and college readiness, why do so many students put in little effort, and what can schools do to encourage student engagement in school? These are the questions tackled by the *Free to Fail* series. This series of short reports examines the challenges students face in high school, and how schools respond to those challenges. The reports show the ways school and teacher practices encourage participation in coursework, and the ways high school structures often work to discourage student work. Through analysis of district-wide student records, surveys of students and teachers,

and in-depth interviews of students and teachers, the reports provide information on students' experiences as they move from eighth grade into high school, through the ninth grade year and beyond—showing how school practices support student engagement in their courses, or leave them free to fail.

A Dramatic Change in Expectations; We Expect More of High Schools Than Ever Before

Over the last 30 years, the costs of failing to graduate from high school have become immense with dropouts earning dramatically less income and being more likely to experience unemployment than ever before, compared to high school graduates.¹ There is also increasing recognition that failure to graduate high school is associated with a host of negative outcomes, such as lower life expectancy and a higher chance of incarceration.² As a result, there is a push to increase graduation rates nationally to 90 percent or higher.³

At the same time, simply graduating from high school is no longer enough to guarantee a middle class life. Following the recession of 2008, the unemployment rate of high school graduates was

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more than double that of college graduates.⁴ It is estimated that 63 percent of U.S. jobs in 2018 will require some form of post-secondary education or training.⁵ Both of these developments point to the increased importance of educational attainment for a student's life chances and aspirations. As a result of changes in the economy, the vast majority of students in the nation and in Chicago now aspire to attain a four-year college degree.⁶

High schools, which are seen as a central part of the solution to these problems, are increasingly expected to graduate all of their students and put everyone on-track to be college-ready. Yet, schools in the United States have never come close to meeting these two goals. Only about 75 percent of students graduate nationally, and trends have been mostly flat for over 40 years—declining since the 1960s and increasing only slightly in recent years.⁷ In Chicago, about one-third of students do not receive regular diplomas. In addition, few students leave high school ready to succeed in college. ACT estimates that one in 10 eighth grade students nationally is on-target to be successful in first year college courses.⁸ In Chicago, half of the graduates do not have the grades and test scores that allow them entrance to even somewhat selective colleges, and only 35 percent of students who do enter a four-year college attain a degree.⁹

Course Performance Is a Key Lever for Both Graduation and College Readiness

While preventing dropouts and preparing students for college may seem like two unrelated challenges, they both can be addressed by attending to one key point of intervention: raising student course performance. In 2005, the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research (UChicago CCSR) used 10 years of longitudinal data across high schools in Chicago to show how students' performance in their ninth grade year could predict who would graduate. At the time, it

was widely believed that dropping out of school was affected by so many different factors—academic histories, peer influences, family circumstances, health problems—that it was not possible to predict who would eventually graduate. However, that study demonstrated that the extent to which students passed their ninth grade courses was highly predictive of eventual graduation, and vastly more predictive than characteristics of students' backgrounds (race, gender, or economic status) or their academic skills as measured by test scores. Students who earned at least five academic credits and had no more than one semester F in a core course in ninth grade—called “*on-track to graduate*”—were almost four times more likely to graduate than students who did not meet these two criteria.¹⁰ Those who received mostly As and Bs in ninth grade were almost guaranteed to graduate—98 percent did so. At the same time, students who failed just one or two semester classes in ninth grade were at high risk for never graduating. As a whole, this research suggested that improving freshman year coursework was a crucial lever for preventing dropouts.

Subsequent research showed that grades are the most important factor for college readiness, as well as being important for graduating from high school. Research in Chicago and across the country has shown that a student's high school GPA is by far the strongest predictor of college admission, persistence, and graduation—much more so than test scores such as the ACT and SAT.¹¹ In fact, students need to attain at least a B average to have even a chance of obtaining a four-year degree.

Unfortunately, a number of studies have documented that students struggle as they begin high school, experiencing declines in grades.¹² Students in urban districts seem especially vulnerable during this period. For example, in 2007, more than half of CPS ninth graders failed at last one course.¹³ Less than a quarter (23 percent) of ninth graders in the 2008-09 school year had a

GPA of 3.0 or above. In short, while improving course performance is a key point of intervention for ensuring that students graduate and stay on the path for college, few schools know how to support students towards these ends.

The *Free to Fail* Series

If reformers are to improve high schools' capacity to prepare all students for college, work, and life, they need to understand the factors that lead students to pass their ninth grade classes and earn high grades. The research briefs in the *Free to Fail* series examine a number of questions that are not addressed by prior research:

Who shows a decline in grades from eighth to ninth grade, and why do their grades decline?

Prior research has documented substantial declines in students' course grades in the ninth grade year. However, we do not know the scope of the problem—whether these declines are specific to certain types of students or problematic schools. For example, is it just students who were already struggling with poor grades in middle school who fail in high school, or are all students at risk? Using data from Philadelphia, Neild and Balfanz (2006) found that students who failed their English or math class in eighth grade were at very high risk of dropout. But many students who eventually dropped out were not flagged by their eighth grade grades, and their work does not show whether grades drop among students with high performance in the middle grades.

There is a lack of information about which types of students show a decline in academic performance in ninth grade, and little is known about whether performance declines across all subjects and in most schools. Balfanz and Letgers (2004) have shown that large numbers of this nation's dropouts come from a contained number of schools which they have labeled "*dropout factories*." This suggests that some schools are

poorly organized to support students in their transition to high school, but it leaves questions about whether students struggle in more typical schools. There are also questions about why grades drop. Prior research has shown that students' course grades are very closely tied to their academic behaviors—coming to class, doing homework, participating, following classroom rules and norms, and help-seeking; these factors are much more important than test scores or student background.¹⁴ Yet, while we know that academic behaviors are important for students' grades, it is not known whether changes in academic behaviors explain the decline in course grades in high school. Why would students attend class and put forth effort in eighth grade, and then disengage when they arrive in high school? Given its strong link with course performance, understanding why students do and do not engage in strong academic behaviors is crucial for improving academic attainment.

The brief, *Free to Fail Across the High School Transition*, addresses questions about which students have declining grades in high school, and why their grades fall. It documents a large decline in student effort across the high school transition, and the consequences for students' grades. Students' unexcused absences quadruple when they move from eighth to ninth grade, and this explains the vast majority of the large drop in grades and pass rates. This decline is observed among high- and low-achieving students, among boys and girls, across all subjects, in high-performing schools and low-performing schools, and in every racial/ethnic group. When students are coming to class and getting their work done one year, and then skipping class and doing less work the next year, it suggests that the school context plays a large role in students' grades and academic behaviors. The brief goes on to discuss the school practices that contribute to the decline. One critical factor is that students come to see attending classes and putting in effort as optional activities.

They confuse having the responsibility to get work done with freedom to not do the work, and school staff lack effective strategies for getting students to put in effort. Those teachers and schools that are more successful at getting students to attend class, pass, and get good grades monitor student performance closely, and design instruction and supports so that students have to opt out of coming to class and doing their work, instead of opting in.

How can ninth-grade teachers support students to be successful in their classes? What practices do students experience as supportive?

Prior research suggests that the relationships students have with teachers and other adults at high schools provide motivation to come to school and support for academic learning and persistence.¹⁵ Schools with more communal environments and strong teacher-student relationships tend to have greater student engagement, reduced absences, and better graduation rates.¹⁶ In our prior work, we found that freshman year grades, failures, and absence rates were better in schools where students reported having high levels of trust in their teachers and that their teachers provide personal support to them.¹⁷ Across elementary, middle, and high school grades, students' perceptions of teacher support are associated with higher student participation and on-task behavior, lower disruptive behavior, and help-seeking.¹⁸

Related to support is the degree to which teachers monitor their students and offer appropriate interventions when they begin to struggle. Roderick (2003) suggested in her study of African American males in eighth and ninth grade that high school teachers' benign neglect allows students to exert minimal effort in coursework and skip class. Similarly, Barber and Olsen (2004) found that decreases in monitoring were related to declining grades as students transitioned through middle school. Students who are reticent about seeking support are particularly at-risk for

not receiving it. Skinner and Belmont (1993) and Marchand and Skinner (2007) documented that students' initial engagement and help-seeking behavior, in part, determined the amount of teacher support they would receive later in the year.

Roderick (2003) also observed in her study of the high school transition that students who sought academic help were more likely to secure teacher support and challenge teachers' initial negative assessments of their performance and behavior.

Thus, there is a substantial body of work suggesting that teachers' relationships with students and support of students are important for this performance. What is lacking is specificity around which practices of teachers and schools matter for students' experiences. We could imagine relationships developing from friendly, informal discussions between teachers and students, but does this mean that all teachers need to be friendly with and knowledgeable about students?

Strong Student-Teacher Relationships Mean Supporting Students as Learners examines the teacher practices that lead students to trust their teachers and view them as fair and caring. It finds students do not want teachers to be their buddies; students want teachers to support them as learners. Students respect teachers who present clear lessons, who monitor their progress and give them regular feedback, and who provide individualized support. Students interpret these actions as showing that teachers care. When instruction is unclear, or when teachers do not help them through their confusion or reach out when they fall behind, students view their teachers as unfair and uncaring. Unfortunately, teacher support in these key areas declines considerably in the transition to high school, along with students' attendance, grades, and pass rates. The structure of high schools makes it more difficult for teachers to provide the same level of monitoring and support as in middle school, and teachers' perceptions of their roles and responsibilities for ensuring students do their

work also are different in high school. This brief highlights the importance of monitoring student performance in the ninth grade year and providing supports as soon as students show signs of withdrawal. This is particularly important to sustain student effort around challenging work because students often respond to academic difficulties by withdrawing effort.

How does the challenge of the curriculum affect students' grades? Do grades decline because ninth grade is too challenging?

High schools are increasingly trying to prepare all students for college; yet, the typical student enters ninth grade below college-readiness benchmarks.¹⁹ In Chicago, a number of schools serve students whose scores are so low that the typical student is not even measured well by the college readiness exam (ACT's EXPLORE).²⁰ There is some evidence that challenging instruction could lead students to struggle and be more likely to fail their classes. Seidman et al. (1996) found that for poor, urban high school students, increased amounts of academic demands and hassles across the high school transition were associated with lower expectations for academic efficacy, less preparation for class, and lower GPAs. In algebra classes in Chicago, we found that students' grades were lower when their incoming skills were substantially lower than their classroom peers.²¹

Despite the potential risks created by raising demands, little is known about whether students actually find high school to be too challenging. Research on the middle school transition found that the first year of junior high school actually required lower-level cognitive skills than classwork at elementary school, suggesting that work does not necessarily get more challenging as students move into higher grades.²² Furthermore, slow-paced work that is not challenging also can lead to disengagement.²³

The Challenge of Implementing Challenging Work examines the degree to which students'

courses are more challenging in ninth grade, as an explanation for students' lower performance in high school than in eighth grade. While it is true that many students enter ninth grade with test scores below the test benchmarks that put them on a path to college readiness, few are exposed to rigorous instruction in ninth grade. In fact, most students are doing the same types of work in ninth grade that they did in eighth grade, with low levels of challenge in their English and math classes. While there is a wide range of instructional quality across neighborhood schools in Chicago, students do not have an equal chance of experiencing high-quality instructional environments. Those who are in Honors classrooms, or higher-achieving schools, are more likely to experience challenging curriculum in orderly classrooms. In classrooms serving students with weak academic skills, teachers often ask little of their students, and teachers who try to implement more challenging lessons struggle to maintain classroom control.

How can teachers support high grades while implementing challenging instruction that supports learning gains?

There is currently a movement to increase the academic challenge of classroom instruction through new curricular standards aimed at preparing all students for college. However, academic challenge is not the only important aspect of classroom instruction. Characteristics such as the clarity of learning goals, the relevance of schoolwork, and the organization of classroom structures may also shape academic engagement, learning, and course performance.²⁴ Clear teacher expectations for academic and social behavior are associated with positive student behaviors and outcomes.²⁵ Relevance in coursework, where tasks are linked to meaningful outcomes, provides a reason for students to come to class and extend effort.²⁶ These are just a few examples from a long list of qualities of instruction that have been shown to be linked to student achievement. While it is

clear that the quality of classroom environments is important, little is known either about how various aspects of classroom environments work together to support or undermine achievement, or about whether different elements of instruction matter for grades versus gains on tests.

Setting the Stage for Academic Challenge examines the ways in which different elements of classroom instruction—such as academic challenge, classroom control, and teacher support—together shape students’ grades and test score gains in high school. The report shows that classroom instruction needs to be challenging for students to show learning gains. However, increasing challenge without good strategies for classroom control and student support can

actually have adverse consequences on students’ achievement. Increasing challenge does not lead to more learning unless teachers can maintain high levels of classroom control. Furthermore, grades decline with higher challenge unless teachers increase the level of support they give students. As teachers respond to new, more challenging curricular standards, they risk higher rates of failure and student disengagement in their classes. This is why it is important that teachers closely monitor students and give them support when they start to struggle, instead of leaving them free to fail. By providing concrete academic support, teachers can sustain student effort so that students get good grades and pass, even in classrooms with challenging work.

Data Sources

The research briefs in this series are drawn from two research projects at UChicago CCSR:

Focus on Freshmen Study: The Focus on Freshman research project examined the transition to high school with the goal of helping educators understand the school practices that contribute to ninth grade performance and what schools can do to support student engagement and academic success. This study followed a cohort of students as they moved from eighth grade in spring 2008, through the ninth grade year (2008–09) and into tenth grade in 2009–10. All students who attended eighth and ninth grade in the district were included in the analysis (about 22,000 students). Through analysis of district-wide student records, surveys of students and teachers, longitudinal in-depth interviews of 55 students and their teachers at a sample of neighborhood schools, and observations of these students’ English and math classrooms in eighth and ninth grade, we examined the scope of the decline in academic performance that occurs in ninth grade and the reasons for the decline. We specifically looked at the ways that teacher support, classroom instruction, and schools practices lead students to be engaged in their work and earn good grades.

Instruction Study: The instruction study used district-wide high school student and teacher survey reports of their experiences in specific classes to identify the instructional elements that were associated with students’ grades and gains on ACT’s EPAS system. Students in grades 9–12 in all CPS non-alternative high schools were invited to participate in the survey administered in fall 2009. Students were grouped into classes using transcript data on course number, period, and teacher ID. We restricted the analytic samples to those students who reported on classes that were academic classes, i.e., English, mathematics, science, social studies, and world language. Relationships of classroom instruction to student achievement were discerned through statistical models adjusted for students’ background characteristics and prior achievement. The analysis of the relationship of instructional elements with students’ grades was based on 58,824 students in 2,575 classrooms in 88 high schools. The analysis of test score gains was based on subjects and grades for which there were standardized test scores, which reduced the analytic sample to 8,754 students in 794 classrooms in 70 high schools.

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- 20 Scores of 12 or below on the EXPLORE are beneath the range of performance that the test is designed to measure well (ACT 2007). Analysis of CPS administrative records showed that in September 2008 students in CPS had an average EXPLORE Reading score of 13.33 and an average EXPLORE Math score of 13.76.
- 21 Nomi and Allensworth (2010).
- 22 Eccles and Midgely (1989).
- 23 Discussions of these issues are available in McDill, Natriello, and Pallas (1986); McPartland and Schneider (1996).
- 24 For example, Gamoran (1997); Gamoran et al. (1995); Weiss (2002); Wenglinsky (2000).
- 25 Connell (1990) cited in Fredricks et al. (2004); Fredricks et al. (2004); Akey (2006).
- 26 Allensworth and Easton (2007); Marks et al. (1996); Newmann et al. (1996); Rhodes et al. (2005).

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